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SUBJECT: CPV ON HUMAN RIGHTS, CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, KOREA

REF: A. Hanoi 2193 B. Seoul 3775 C. Seoul 1962

1. (SBU) Summary: In a meeting with visiting SFRC staffer Frank Jannuzi, CPV officials said human rights and democracy were secondary priorities for Vietnam behind meeting the population's basic material needs; that freedom to operate in the Central Highlands would be especially slow in coming for UNHCR due to UNHCR's previous "betrayal" of Vietnam; and that the GVN had temporarily suspended the assisted migration of lowland Vietnamese into the Central Highlands in order to give the ethnic minority population a chance to participate in economic development without having to compete with new arrivals. DPRK refugees were not permitted to enter Vietnam but some had been able to do so because they were mistaken for Chinese or Vietnamese travelers by border authorities, the officials said. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer Frank Jannuzi met Bui The Giang, Director of the People-to-People Relations Department of the Commission for External Relations of the CPV's Central Committee, on August 31, 2004. Deputy Director Le Quang Ba of the External Relations Commission's Northeast Asia Department was also at the meeting.

HUMAN RIGHTS: LATER.

3. (SBU) Jannuzi asked Giang what he could "take back to Washington" on the subject of human rights. Giang said he understood the human rights issue well, including the U.S. domestic political aspect, but he thought the United States did not fully understand Vietnam. "Individual expression of religion - even by my wife, a devout Buddhist - is perfectly acceptable in Vietnam. And I am a Communist Party official." Giang explained further that in Vietnam there was no distinction between registered and unregistered religions, the way there was in some countries. Restriction did not occur in Vietnam until political organizations entered the picture masquerading as religious organizations, he said. "The stability and unity of Vietnam are crucial and cannot be threatened," Giang stated. "Too much time and blood have been shed for us - who protect this country - to tolerate a threat." Giang characterized Vietnam as a "poor nation that has to prioritize its needs" and said that the first priority was to feed the population. "When everyone can eat, we can consider wider democratic freedoms," Giang said. Abuses were an unfortunate reality in the current system, Giang acknowledged, due to "bad behavior by individual officials."

4. (SBU) Jannuzi stressed the need for faster change in Vietnam. Of course concern about necessities of life was important, he conceded, but the next step for Vietnam had to be to realize the capacity of the individual. Vietnam would never reach its full capacity without enhancing individual energy and freedom, Jannuzi said.

PACE OF CHANGE AND THE NATURE OF THE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

5. (SBU) Giang admitted that the GVN and CPV had internal debates on how much change to allow and at what pace. "We are impatient," he said, "moving from a war-ravaged society into the future. Our current progress is far from what we expect to accomplish." The difficulty, he said, was finding a policy that met Vietnam's internal needs for stability and growth within a set structure while remaining acceptable to the international community. The pace, order, and magnitude of change - political, social, and economic - were the subjects of "constant internal debate."

6. (SBU) Jannuzi said the USG would like to increase cooperation with Vietnam on a variety of issues, notably information exchange, law enforcement, and the rule of law. Giang said he knew the USG was "frustrated at the slow progress in these fields" but urged Jannuzi to consider that, "in comparison with Vietnam's progress with other countries, the United States is not doing too badly."

7. (SBU) Jannuzi suggested Vietnam look at China for possible lessons on how to deal with the USG, especially

Congress. He noted that the sophistication and depth of U.S.-China cooperation on significant issues such as North Korea and terrorism made a difference in Congress' attitudes towards China and affected the "context" in which Congress viewed sensitive issues such as Taiwan and human rights. An example in Vietnam would be access to the Central Highlands, he said. Jannuzi thanked Giang for the GVN's willingness to allow him to visit the Central Highlands, but noted that it would be even better if UNHCR and external media outlets could have free access to the region. In addition, regularized contacts between the Embassy and the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) and more authoritative access to information on all subjects would greatly smooth and enhance our bilateral relationship.

UNHCR BETRAYED US ONCE BEFORE

18. (SBU) Giang lamented that access to the Central Highlands was often a "local problem" and that the offices of the Central Committee of the CPV were sometimes refused permission to go to the Central Highlands because the local administration feared that a visit from Hanoi could "stir things up." Receiving permission for the United States, or Sweden, or UNHCR, was even more difficult. UNHCR, he said bitterly, was "untrustworthy." "Two years ago we signed a tripartite agreement with UNHCR and Cambodia," Giang explained, "and the next day, UNHCR smacked us in the face. They betrayed us."

19. (SBU) In a separate meeting, UNHCR Vietnam head Vu Anh Son acknowledged to Poloff that, in early 2002, shortly after signing a tripartite agreement with Cambodia and Vietnam regarding the modalities for the return of over 1,000 ethnic Gia Rai migrants who had fled from Dak Lak province in Vietnam into Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri provinces in Cambodia following the 2001 unrest in the Central Highlands, UNHCR "withdrew unilaterally" from the agreement. UNHCR withdrew from the agreement because the GVN had sent buses filled with "rough guys" posing as family members visiting the two UNHCR sites in Cambodia. Those "rough guys" had destroyed the sites and UNHCR property and intimidated the migrants, Son said. Subsequently, UNHCR returned 15 of the migrants, 200 returned on their own, and 900 were resettled in the United States under a U.S.-Cambodia bilateral agreement, he added.

SUSPENSION OF MOVEMENT INTO THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

10. (SBU) Giang said that as a result of "the development of negative feelings and hostility towards incoming lowlanders" migration into the Central Highlands had been "temporarily halted." An additional motivation was the desire to give the ethnic minority residents the opportunity to enhance their participation in the economic development of the Central Highlands without "heavy competition" from new arrivals. [Note: Giang was referring to the GVN's decision, announced by Deputy PM Nguyen Tan Dung on August 20, to halt assisted migration into the Central Highlands under the "new economic zones" program. End note.]

DPRK REFUGEES: SUPREMELY AWKWARD TOPIC

11. (SBU) Shifting gears, Jannuzi thanked Giang and Ba for allowing the movement of over 400 DPRK refugees from Ho Chi Minh City to Seoul (reftels), and for Vietnam's "humane" policy of turning a blind eye to illegal DPRK migrants transiting Vietnam. After a lengthy and uncomfortable pause, Ba stated that the GVN did not "permit" DPRK migrants to enter Vietnam but noted that Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese people looked similar and it was very difficult for border guards and other officials to tell them apart.

12. (SBU) Comment: Giang is always a genial interlocutor, and his easy style and American (Johns Hopkins SAIS) education contribute to cordial exchanges. He does not waver from the CPV line, however, as demonstrated in his comments about human rights and UNHCR. The suspension of the program to provide financial assistance to those moving to the Central Highlands is potentially a positive step, though Jannuzi's later meeting in the Highlands called into question whether it will be implemented (septel). The GVN still has no specific plans to deal with so-called "free immigrants" who continue to migrate into the Highlands without GVN assistance. Ongoing movement by that population, many of whom are ethnic minorities from the Northwest, will limit the suspension's effectiveness. End Comment.

MARINE